

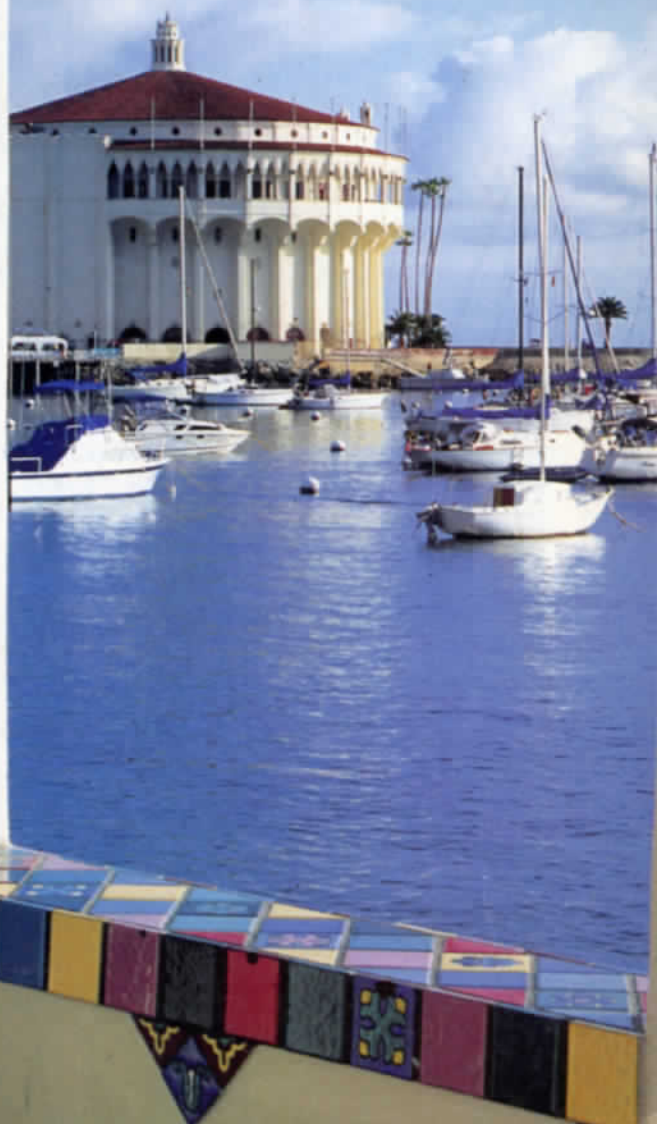
THE REEL WEST: THUMBS UP FOR FILM FESTIVALS FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA

Westways

JULY 1995 \$2.95

The Magazine for Southern California

Catalina
The
Art
of
the
Island



Article by Bill Stern

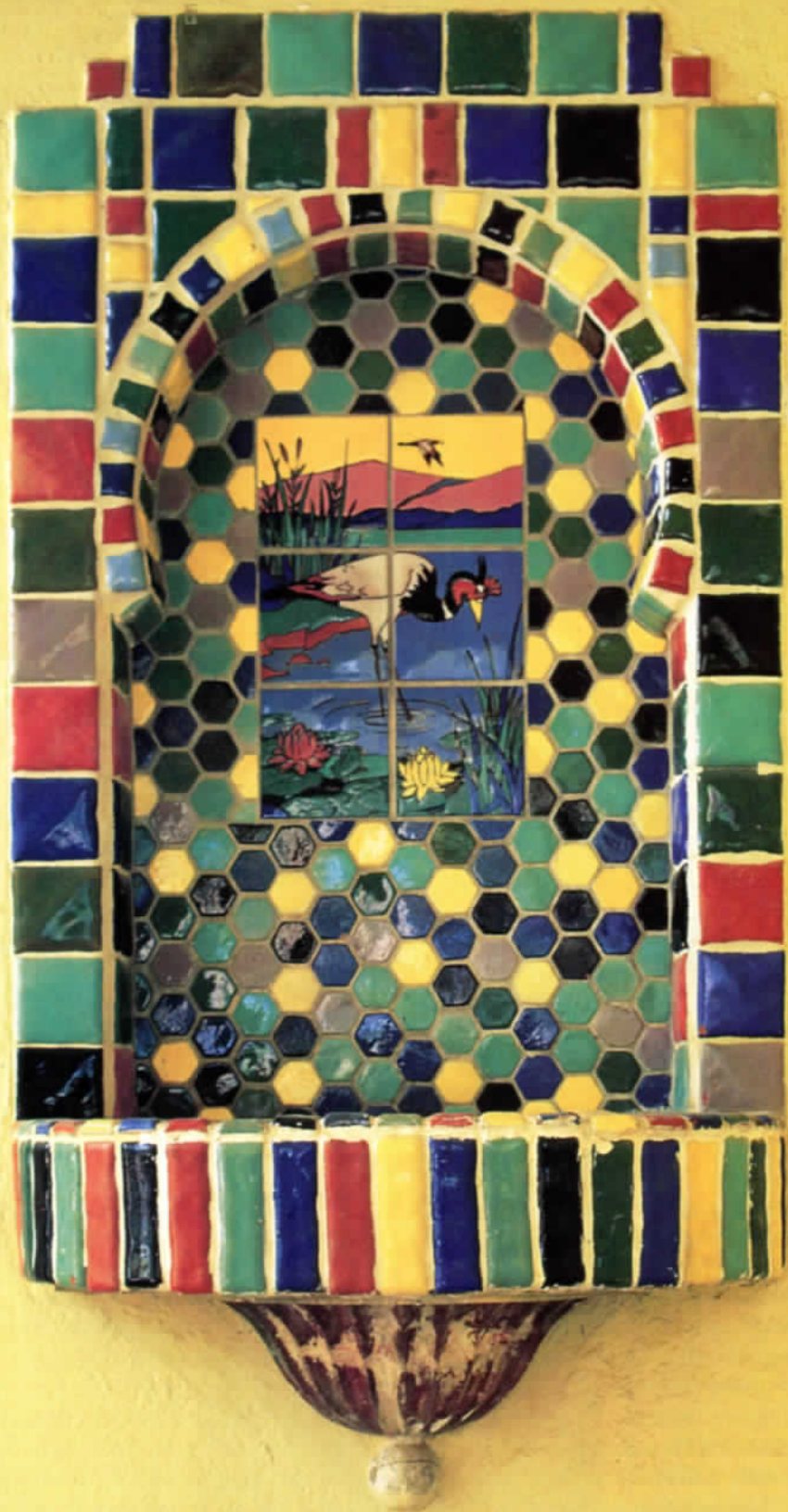
Treasure Island

Photographs by Grant Mudford

A
tile-by-tile
tour of
Catalina's landmark
ceramic sites.



Westways



Throughout Catalina, from the waterfront (opposite page) to the country club (left), the island's tradition of artful tile design is on view.



WHEN I CAME to Southern California in the 1970s, I expected to be surrounded by testaments to the region's Spanish colonial past. In time, of course, I would get to know the historic precincts of Los Angeles and other cities, but more often than not I found streets and boulevards lined with strip malls and dingbat apartment buildings. It wasn't until I started filling my cabinets and shelves with 1930s California pottery that I felt I had found the California of my dreams.

Since the day in 1980 when I bought my first pieces of red, orange, green, and yellow dishware at a neighbor's yard sale, my interest in these California originals has never ceased to grow—nor has my collection, which now numbers several thousand pieces. My appreciation of California pottery opened my eyes to decorated tile, especially that made on Santa Catalina Island.

After a decade of collecting, I made my first pottery pilgrimage to Catalina and almost at once found myself transfixed

by a polychrome tile panel. I can still see it. In the background, lavender mountains rise into a yellow sky. In the foreground, red and yellow water lilies float on seafoam green lily pads. And in the center, a majestic crested crane—its feathers red, white, and black, its beak yellow—fishes in a placid lake. This scene, framed by Moresque tiles and flanked by panels depicting fantastic oriental birds, forms the backdrop for just one of the island's exuberant ceramic fountains.

Nothing, I realize, had prepared me for this experience. Not tables inlaid with tile images of blue and green marlins or blue and black toucans or red and green and blue macaws. Not even faithful color photographs of the island's most stunning installations. For the tiled facades, patios, stairways, rooftops, and fountains of Catalina Island are the most concentrated public expression of the golden age of California pottery, which lasted from the late 1920s through the '30s.



IN THE BEGINNING

In recent years, pottery—including both tile and tableware—has come to say "Catalina Island" as much as the glass-bottom boats, the flying fish, and the Casino do. The distinctive pottery was created by artisans at the Catalina Clay Products Co. at Peppy Beach, just south of Avalon. The company was founded to produce bricks, patio pavers, and roof tiles for the construction projects of William Wrigley Jr., who had bought the island in 1919. But Wrigley, of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum and Chicago's Wrigley Field fame, was determined to make Catalina Island "a monument to the early beginnings of California." So in 1929, Catalina Clay Products began



producing ornamental glazed tiles for Wrigley's Moorish Revival Casino. Almost at once these tiles began to be used to decorate the interiors and exteriors of Spanish Colonial homes and civic structures both on and off Catalina.

Although these tiles were handmade using local clays and mineral oxides, their designs, like most aspects of Spanish Colonial Revival ornamentation, did not come from early California, which had no history of decorative tile manufacture. The geometric designs of Catalina tile were adapted from traditional Hispano-Moresque models, somewhat in the way

The beachfront plaza in Avalon is one giant installation of classic tile.

that today's Ralph Lauren products adapt vintage styles to evoke an idealized earlier epoch. Nonetheless, Catalina tile, and California pottery in general, is now recognized as a significant contribution to American decorative arts.

ROMANCING THE MISSIONS

By the end of the 1920s, Southern California had popularized a colorful, but mostly synthetic, history for itself. The

hardships of life in the Spanish missions became romantic and glamorous, thanks to *Ramona*, an 1884 novel that would sell more than 600,000 copies by 1946. And Spanish Colonial Revival architecture and decorative arts, including sophisticated buildings with wrought iron work, pottery, and tiles, were clever inventions of the early part of this century.

Decorative glazed tile was perhaps the most striking element introduced by the Spanish Colonial Revival. It is likely that the first of these Southern California-made pictorial and geometric tiles were created for the 1915 Panama-California International Exposition in San Diego's Balboa Park. Although in time numerous pottery companies throughout California would produce tiles to ornament buildings and furniture, none would equal the renown of those made on Catalina Island between 1929 and 1937.

In the '30s, California pottery, like the preceding Mission Revival buildings and decorative arts, represented a leap of mythic proportions from the utilitarian spirit of the Spanish missions. Made in and near Los Angeles, these brightly colored wares, which carried names like "Early California," "Native California," "El Chico," "El Patio," and, perhaps most evocative of all, "Catalina Island," were a far cry from the dour output of the 18th-century missions. They propagated the dream of a rustic, casual, but tastefully decorated hacienda lifestyle that helped promote tourism and real estate sales in Southern California.

OURING THE TILES

Fortunately, more than half a century after it ceased being made, outstanding examples of this artistry can still be seen. On the mainland, almost all Catalina tile installations and collections are in private residences. On Catalina Island, however, you simply can't help seeing the tile. In Avalon, it's almost always in sight: on houses, storefronts, benches, stairways, rooftops, storage sheds, and even in rest rooms. And since Avalon can be crossed on foot in about 20 minutes, you could probably see all of the major—and most of the minor—tile sites in a weekend and still have time to pay attention to the island's natural beauty.



Some of the most striking tile work greets you just steps from where the ferry docks. Right there on Crescent Avenue, with the promenade facing you as you head into town, are facades covered with tiles in characteristic Catalina pottery colors: Monterey brown, obsidian, *descanso* green, toyon red, cobalt blue, mandarin yellow, and sea-foam green. The row of one- and two-story shops and restaurants could be Main Street, USA, except for the tiles, whose striking geometric patterns soar toward the sky and whose perching macaws and toucans seem ready to take flight.

Early Catalina patio tile installations can be seen on the steps of El Encanto Market Place, at the country club, and at the entrance to the Inn on Mount Ada (the former Wrigley home, which is open to the public for guided tours). In the Catalina Island Museum, located on the ground floor of the Casino, are tables with Catalina tile inlays, among them a beautiful multicolored tile backgammon board, as well as dishware, art pottery, and other island artifacts. The patio of the Casino is paved with geometric-patterned tile (the Casino itself was built for dancing but not for gambling or drinking, both of which Wrigley forbade on his island).

The Chicago Cubs trained on Catalina for 30 years, long after Wrigley's death in 1932 and the end of Catalina pottery production in 1937. The team was housed in a cluster of small Spanish Colonial bungalows called Las Casitas; their stucco walls are splashed with color from embedded tiles. On the grounds of Bird Park (a former aviary now used as a preschool) the only exotic birds on view these days inhabit the original tile panels that adorn the crumbling walls. Many

Exuberant tiles adorn El Encanto Market Place (right), a private residence in Avalon (below), and the facade of a Crescent Avenue shop (opposite page).



TILE NUTS AND BOLTS

Although Avalon is small, some of the major tile sites, including the Wrigley Memorial and Bird Park, are too far apart to walk to. However, they can be visited most conveniently on the Discovery Tours offered by the Catalina Island Company. (The crested-crane fountain, originally built for Bird Park, is now located near the company's Spanish Colonial Revival ticket kiosk in Avalon Plaza.) Because the number of cars on the island is strictly limited, none can be rented, but gasoline-powered golf carts can be used to visit the less conveniently located tile sites. A brightly capped Moresque-style gatehouse marks the only road into the island's interior; special permission is needed to explore the rest of the largely uninhabited island, most of which is under the protection of the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy; (310) 510-1421.

For more information on touring Catalina tile sites: Catalina Island Visitor's Bureau, (310) 510-1520. Tile Heritage Foundation, (707) 431-8453. Santa Catalina Island Company's Discovery Tours, (310) 510-2500.

To buy original Catalina tiles: Bryce Bannatyne Gallery, 2439 Main St., Santa Monica; (310) 396-9668. Antiques and Objects, 446 S. Fair Oaks Ave., Pasadena; (818) 796-8224. Jack Moore Craftsman Furniture, 59 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena; (818) 577-7746. The Old California Store, 1528 E. Thompson Blvd., Ventura; (805) 643-4217. Verlangieri Gallery, P.O. Box 844, Cambria; (805) 927-4428.

To order reproduction and custom-made Catalina-style tiles: Will Richards Studio, Bird Park Road, Avalon; (310) 510-1714. Bob Harris, Malibu Ceramic Works, P.O. 1406, Topanga; (310) 455-2485. R.T.K. Studios (Richard Keit), 406 Unit Q Bryant St., Ojai; (805) 640-9360. Mission Tile West, 853 Mission St., South Pasadena; (818) 799-4595. Miller Art Tile, 309 N. Orchard, Burbank; (818) 972-9339. Michael King Designs, 1030 Calle Sombra, Suite D, San Clemente; (714) 361-2074. Ishmus Tile Co., 630 Barsby, Vista; (619) 726-6832.

For Catalina travel and lodging information, purchase a copy of the *Catalina Island* guidebook (\$4.95) at any Auto Club office.



From a simple planter (right) to the grandiose Wrigley Memorial (below and opposite page), Catalina's architectural landscape is awash in color.

of these bird designs were created by the late Roger "Bud" Upton, a Catalina painter.

Other tile installations, including the Serpentine Wall, a low structure separating Crescent Avenue from the beach, were designed by Otis Shepard, chief artist of Catalina Clay Products. Shepard is credited with the idea of using factory seconds to decorate Catalina's concrete planter boxes. Combining mismatched pictorial and geometric tiles in a jazzy style, these planters can be seen on Crescent Avenue. At the Catalina Visitors' Country Club, geometric designs ornament the drinking fountain and the refreshment stand; even the wall in the men's room contains a helter-skelter burst of line and color. And in the portico of the Avalon School, students have created their own folk art installation: decades of names written in pencil on the grout between the tiles.



Perched on a hillside next to the bird sanctuary is the Will Richards Studio. A craftsman and amateur archaeologist, Richards has paved his patio with Catalina bricks and tiles that he salvaged from excavation sites and garbage dumps. Having also recovered pieces of original molds, Richards makes reproduction tiles, which he sells. Several mainland artisans, among them Bob Harris of Topanga and Richard Keit of

Ojai, also produce fine-quality reproductions. Keit recently restored the tile work on the Wrigley Memorial at the head of Avalon Canyon.

Catalina's exquisite tile installations provide a romantic image of California towns and cities bathed in a welcoming flourish of bold colors. Of course, none ever were. But nonurban Avalon, thanks in large measure to its incomparable treasure of Catalina tile, comes as close to evoking the mythic Spanish colonial California as any place I know. ■

